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Two Approaches to Tenure and Promotion Criteria

Should you emphasize procedures or judgment in tenure deliberations?

By Eugene Matusov and Robert Hampel

In a recent flurry of e-mails and conversations about promotion policies in our school of education, we realized that our colleagues differ sharply in their notions of how scholarship should be evaluated. They agree on the importance of highquality work, but they disagree on how to determine whether high quality has been achieved. Some faculty members prefer what we call a "procedural model," others a "judgment model." We are advocates of the latter model; it is the most democratic and the fairest approach to tenure decisions and gives departments the best chance of arriving at a real, rather than a default, decision.

Procedural Model

The procedural model features a set of specific measures of the caliber of scholarship. Faculty need not decide on their own whether a candidate's work meets the official criteria and what these criteria mean for particular cases because well-crafted policies, if applied faithfully by a committee, will do that. By prioritizing types of publications (for example, peer reviewed over non–peer reviewed), rating scholarly journals (for example, lower acceptance rates over higher rates), asking external reviewers to vote for or against promotion (and to justify the vote), and using other predetermined criteria to gauge the merits of the candidate's scholarship, the faculty avoids the need to decide for itself if the work is good enough to merit promotion. Faculty meetings to discuss the pros and cons of the dossier are unnecessary. Even candidates' meetings with promotion and tenure committees will be infrequent because crystal-clear procedures let candidates develop their own cases without much oversight.

Advocates of this approach want to minimize painful surprises for candidates. Everything should be as predictable as possible. They don't want to relive Alvin Kernan's experience in the Yale English department in the early 1960s, which he sums up in his 2000 book *In Plato's Cave*: "I suspect that some of us were merely lucky, some unlucky." Because the criteria are elaborated in clear and detailed language, the promotion and tenure process is objective, fair, impersonal, and readily defended should anyone grieve or sue. Not only are candidates spared a jolt, but the entire department lives together more harmoniously. There is less chance of revenge—"you voted against me, next time I will vote against you"—and less chance of warfare between advocates of conflicting paradigms who rest their cases on the demolition of their opponents' views. It is easier to collaborate with

senior colleagues, sharing rough drafts and acknowledgingmistakes without fear of unpleasant consequences later. The possibility for meanness cannot be eliminated—an expectation of fifteen refereed journal articles might cause widespread pain—but the intent is to minimize unpredictable nastiness.

Judgment Model

The judgment model, which we favor, obligates the faculty to discuss and evaluate the quality of the scholarship under review. Even if a promotion and tenure committee prepares a recommendation, each faculty member independently confirms or refutes that appraisal. Even if the promotion guidelines are clear and lengthy, the determination of what constitutes "excellence" (or other key words in the guidelines) cannot be made by a formula or subcontracted to external reviewers. Each colleague must devote the time and effort to decide whether a candidate's work is excellent and then be able to explain and defend that assessment in a faculty meeting.

As advocates of the judgment model, we hear one criticism voiced more than any other: it is impossible to evaluate most colleagues' work. Departments of education include too many specializations for any individual to determine accurately strong, weak, or mediocre research in the cases of all candidates. We might hazard an opinion, but when a colleague's future is on the line, everyone wants to set forth more than a guess. Is it not better to entrust the judgment of the quality of the candidate's scholarship to external reviewers who are experts in the field?

Although external reviewers can provide very good assessments of the scholarship's quality and thus inform the department's decision, their judgments alone are not enough. There are several wellknown reasons for caution. Some external reviewers are too generous in their assessments in order to nurture their own field, especially when that field is small. On the other hand, some external reviewers are too tough because they want to guard a field that is very competitive. Moreover, many candidates can nominate external reviewers who they know will send glowing letters.

Less often discussed is the point that the reviewers' judgments need to be judged. That is, a fixed standard of excellence in any field is usually an illusion. When a peer reviewer assesses a manuscript, he or she examines the author's arguments, evidence, and research methods in relation to ongoing debates within the field. The ultimate basis of many external reviews is the strength of the contribution to the field. But who judges the strength of the field itself and its leaders' notions of excellence? In our view, those are judgments properly made by the departmental colleagues of the candidate. For example, a candidate in the 1950s might have presented several qualitative case studies to an educational leadership department in a college of education. The external reviewers would probably have been skeptical; the quest for an administrative science was the rage in that decade. It would have been the duty of the candidate's departmental colleagues to decide what that trend meant. Was the field, by favoring administrative science, finally acquiring the rigor educational leadership needed and had lacked? Or was it overstretching for precision unsuited to its subject matter?

Faculty might claim that they are unable to determine whether or not their

colleagues' specialties have acceptable standards of excellence. One wonders, in that case, what it means to be a department, but that question aside, faculty judgments can be partial yet still crucial. It is not the case that each and every person must make final judgments on the merits of a candidate's scholarship individually and in isolation. Those judgments can and should be reached together, as with other important departmental issues. To that end, we should consult with each other and with colleagues outside the department, reread the external reviewers' letters, share concerns and questions, and ask colleagues to explain and justify their views. For example, although the authors are not experts in sophisticated statistical models, we can still raise apt questions about the validity of such models. Then our colleagues who are experts in that area can address our concerns.

Mutually Exclusive?

To be sure, these two models are not mutually exclusive. It is hard to imagine procedures without any judgments or judgments wholly without procedures. Even so, they represent two positions, and most of our colleagues know that the approaches differ significantly, points of overlap notwithstanding. In the procedural model, the exercise of individual judgment is considered a flaw in the promotion and tenure policies, inviting arbitrariness, while in the judgment model, such exercise is welcomed as constructive. In the procedural model, judgment is subordinated to rules, even if judgment was required in the past to create the procedures; in the judgment model, rules exist only to facilitate judgment.

Procedures, rules, and standards can work very well to evaluate recursive, well-defined, and stable cases and events. However, evaluating out-of-the-ordinary, ill-defined, and nonrecursive cases and events requires judgment.We argue that scholarship demanding originality, creativity, and innovation is exactly this kind of out-of-the-ordinary case. In this regard, the relationship between the procedural and judgment models is analogous to the relationship between monarchy and democracy: a king might make a better decision than a parliament but, in contrast to the parliament, when the king is wrong, it is difficult to get rid of him.Without the constant public forums that a judgment model promotes, it is difficult both to sense a problem with a procedure and to change it when a particular case demands it.

A procedural model may value harmonious relationships over the quality of scholarship. For the judgment model, harmonious relationships are less important than assurance of the main purpose of academic research—the rigorous pursuit of knowledge. If academics prioritize predictability, safety, and harmonious relations over ensuring the excellence of their work, then the academic community will be in danger. As soon as we shy away from debates about "exceptional ability as a productive scholar, using this phrase in the widest possible sense," to quote former Harvard president James Conant, we fatally weaken our claim to be a profession. Without peer review grounded on judgment-based appraisal, our scholarship will stagnate and deteriorate, as happened in the Stalinist Soviet Union in the late 1940s and 1950s during the rule of agricultural biologist Trofim Lysenko's "Marxist biology" with its rejection of genetics, a field that did not fit the preset standards of the Marxist-Leninist dialectical philosophy.

We want to acknowledge one unsettling consequence of the judgment model. It unavoidably promotes "nasty relations" among colleagues. Civil, friendly, respectful discourse should always mark the promotion and tenure process. We mean something else by the phrase "nasty relations": the consequences of airing critical opinions of a colleague's scholarship. Those critical judgments can be made cordially, but they are still negative when they cause a candidate to lose what she or he sought. In our view, negative judgments are unavoidable, at least occasionally, even when a department takes pains to hire well-qualified and promising junior faculty.

Unfortunately, there is no way for candidates to remain untouched if colleagues tell them that their scholarship is unsatisfactory and that they will therefore not be reappointed, promoted, or tenured. One cannot be calm on the grounds that this decision is professional, not personal (in fact, that would probably make the person feel worse). One naturally dislikes, if not hates, the colleagues who consider one inadequate. "Destabilizing" was the euphemism used by one of our colleagues who wrote a book chapter about her tenure ordeal.

A negative decision may also be difficult for those who vote. It is very hard to look straight in the eye of any colleague whose scholarship you have publicly criticized, even if the candidate is unaware of what you said. You may not want to harm the candidate's professional or personal well-being, and you may feel guilty about the harm inevitably caused by a negative decision. But to paraphrase Winston Churchill's famous quip about democracy, a judgment model for faculty tenure and promotion is the worst form of government except for all the others that have been tried.

Concern for our colleagues' wellbeing might have to take another form. We may need to develop some kind of ceremony of reconciliation where we collectively soothe the wounds left by a contested promotion and tenure case and come together again as a community despite our tough talk about each other's work. It might even be a party, a festive meeting with your adversaries. For instance, after the Czech president Vaclav Havel lost the presidency in a parliamentary vote as a result of his support of the public referendum on Slovakia's separation from Czechoslovakia, he invited his successful adversary to drink beer. We need something like that from time to time. And before that happens, we need to develop the habit of talking about each other's work. Brown-bag lunches,mentoring sessions for junior faculty, posting drafts online, and other visible and public displays of what we are writing would help foster a culture of open discussion apart from the stressful promotion and tenure months.

Finally, there is a question left: can a large department carry out the judgment model? Several of our colleagues feel that we, at approximately sixty faculty, are too big— that unless everyone sits around a large table to exchange views, it will be too easy to hide, to avoid nasty relations, to save time by not reading the dossiers, to let someone else do the work. Do large departments necessarily promote the procedural model? Must smaller units be formed for judgment-based promotion decisions, thus leaving out many colleagues from an activity we view as central to what it means to be a community? We leave these important questions unanswered here, but we admit that it has been harder to rally our colleagues around the judgment model as our own school of education expanded in size over

the past decade.

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